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ABSTRACT

There has been disagreement among linguists and psychologists concerning the age at which children develop social perceptions of others on the basis of difference in speech. The purpose of the present study was to determine in what ways eight- and nine-year-old children from different socioeconomic backgrounds might react to dialect differences. The ninety-two subjects came from three schools: thirty-two from a school in a lower- and working-class neighborhood in New York City; thirty from a public school in a middle class suburban area near Albany, New York; and thirty from a high-tuition suburban private school for upper middle class children, also near Albany. The children were randomly chosen eight- and nine-year-olds of both sexes. The study was designed to explore their reactions to "standard" and "non standard" Black American English and to determine the extent to which such children could verbally conceptualize their attitudes using a simplified version of the Osgood semantic differential scale. The scale included the five categories of intelligence (smart-dumb), appearance (pretty-ugly), personality (nice-mean), economic background (rich-poor), and race (black-white). The results show that eight- and nine-year-olds are sensitive to speech differences and, moreover, have absorbed many of the attitudes of society toward standard and non-standard speech. They are also able to conceptualize verbally their attitudes toward speech differences. They have not yet, however, formulated a complete racial stereotype matching the adult model. (Author/CFM)

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CHILDRENS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SPEAKERS OF STANDARD AND NON-STANDARD ENGLISH

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BACKGROUND

For some time there has been disagreement among linguists and psychologists concerning the age at which children develop social perceptions of others on the basis of differences in speech. A decade ago William Labov (1965) suggested that children do not attach social significance to dialect differences until about the time of puberty. At about the same time, another prominent linguist took an opposing view, suggesting that very young children have "very considerable skill in judging adults by their speech" (Joos, 1966: 103). Such contrasting views are not surprising since most of the research which was being undertaken on children's language at the time related primarily to such areas as speech comprehension and production. There was little direct reference to children's attitudes toward speech differences in these studies (e.g., Eisenberg, et.al., 1968; Osser, et.al., 1969).

Subsequent research has begun to focus more directly upon the attitudes of children that may be triggered by dialect differences. Baratz (1969) demonstrated that a majority of the third graders (both black and white) who participated in her study identified racial differences on the basis of speech differences. More recently, other researchers have designed studies to further explore childrens' attitudes toward dialect differences.

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Rosenthal (1974) demonstrated that the preschool children in her study reacted in different ways to different speech patterns. In an earlier study, Fleming (1971) attempted to find significantly different attitudes in 9 year-olds toward various tape-recorded dialects. Variables in his study included social class and ethnic group membership of both the speakers and the 9 year-old listeners-subjects. Fleming's conclusions were tentative: "Despite the mention of only a few of the many otherwise acknowledged limitations of this recorded study, the preliminary results nonetheless have informed and encouraged an attempt to refine the instruments and techniques. In spite of the absence of statistically significant effects, there seems to be enough justification to continue to pursue the possibility that at least for some children, listening to certain others, what they hear is simply not 'just talk'" (Fleming, 1971:330).

PURPOSE

In the present study we have attempted to determine in what ways 8 and 9 year-old children from different socioeconomic backgrounds might also react to dialect differences. Further, we were interested in determining the extent to which such children could verbally conceptualize their attitudes using a simplified version of the Osgood semantic differential scale (Osgood, 1952). We felt it was appropriate to attempt using this scale with our subjects since Shuy (1970) had demonstrated that middle-class 6th graders were as capable as adults of using it effectively.

Our study was designed to explore the reactions of 8 and 9 year-old children to "standard" and "nonstandard" Black American English. Non-standard Black English utilizes a number of forms that are highly stigmatized in our society (Shuy, 1972). Our assumption was that if children were going to react to speech patterns at all, they would react to these most socially significant ones.

DESIGN

The ninety-two subject children listened to two recorded speech samples: an educated southern Black woman (Voice I, standard speaker) and an uneducated southern Black woman (Voice II, non-standard speaker) of the same age. The speech samples were each one and a half minutes long and consisted of extemporaneous, unemotional descriptions of the womens' daily routines. The children were asked to respond to the two speech samples by completing the semantic differential scale for each of the two speakers. (See Appendix for copy of scale). The ninety-two children sampled came from three different schools. Thirty-two were from a school in a lower and working class neighborhood in New York City. Thirty were from a public school in a middle class suburban area, and another thirty were from a high-tuition suburban private school for upper middle class children. Both of the suburban schools are located near Albany, New York. In each group the children were randomly chosen 8 and 9 year-olds of both sexes.

PROCEDURES

The children were tested in groups of from 6 to 10. We chose this size group since we wanted to record individual comments and minimize the interaction among the subjects during the experiment. The subjects were seated around a table and the tape recorder was placed in the center of the table. The subjects were given copies of the scale and

instructed to keep them face down. There was a practice exercise which began as follows. "Before we begin: How many of you have ever listened to someone speaking on the radio and then tried to imagine what the person was like just from hearing the voice?" The subjects usually replied enthusiastically that they had.

They were then told that they were going to hear some voices and to try to imagine what the speakers were like. In order to accustom them to the semantic differential scale, they made a practice scale on the reverse of the form and were shown how to use it. The practice variables were:

man - - - - - woman

tall - - - - - short

After hearing a short sample of speech the children marked their responses on this practice scale. Then they turned over their papers and recorded their names and ages and circled "boy" or "girl".[1] We then read over the semantic differential scale together to make sure that all the children understood the categories. The scale included the categories of intelligence (smart-dumb), appearance (pretty-ugly), personality (nice-mean), economic background (rich-poor), and race (black-white).

The subjects listened to Voice I with their papers face down, then turned their sheets over and recorded their judgments of the speaker in terms of the five categories above. The same procedure was followed for Voice II. The sheets were collected and a free discussion followed. The discussion was designed to elicit comments by the children concerning their attitudes toward the two speakers.

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1 In the lower, working class school we were instructed not to record names.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, the children's responses, summarized in Table 1, [1] followed a predictable pattern: the positive qualities (smart, pretty, rich, nice) were attributed more often to the standard English-speaking Voice I and the negative qualities (dumb, ugly, poor, mean) were attributed more often to non-standard Voice II. For the three categories of intelligence, appearance, and economic background the assignment of positive traits (smart, pretty, rich) to standard speech and negative traits (dumb, ugly, poor) to non-standard speech was demonstrated by Chi-square analyses to be significant well beyond the $p < .05$ level (Charts 1,2,3). Chart 4 for the category of personality (nice-mean) shows this same pattern of responses, but the differences are much smaller and are more meaningful when viewed as following the general pattern.

[Insert Table 1 and Charts 1,2,3,4 about here]

Chart 5 illustrates that even though both speakers were black, the predominently standard English of Voice I was judged by 53% of the children to be white, whereas only 6% believed the non-standard English of Voice II to be white. Had Voice I spoken a completely standard English we feel that even more subjects would have believed the speaker to be white.[2] This supports prior research which has suggested that

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[1] In tabulating the results, the categories of "very" and "kind of" at each end of the scale were collapsed to form a three-category scale.

[2] Voice I did use a few non-standard features. For instance, she said "about a hour" and "sometime_ it consists of...".

standard dialects are identified as being used by white speakers, and non-standard dialects as being used by black speakers (Labov, 1969).

[Insert Chart 5 about here]

We also noted that all of the children (N=6) who thought Voice II was white were Black. This suggests no mystery since in casual conversation with these children it was learned that they frequently go South to such states as North Carolina and Georgia to visit relatives. They thus have occasion to hear whites speaking a non-standard Southern dialect. Since there is some overlap between white and black non-standard dialects (some stigmatized features are common to both), such judgments are not surprising (Labov, 1969). Labov also has provided insights into how this "mixing" or overlap of features from two dialects is more generally perceived. He notes that:

> "this overlap either with Southern white speech or with the speech of recently immigrated white speakers who live in close proximity to black ghettos does not prevent the features from being identified with Negro speech by most listeners: we are dealing with a stereotype which provides correct identification in the great majority of cases, and therefore with a firm basis in social reality. Such stereotypes are the social basis of language perceptions; this is merely one of the many cases where listeners generalize from the variable data to categorical perception in absolute terms. Someone who uses a stigmatized form 20 to 30 percent of the time will be heard as using this form all of the time." (Labov, 1969:34)

Although results of our study seem to indicate the children have developed full stereotypes about others on the basis of speech (Chart 6), they did in fact react differently from adults in at least one respect. Adults, according to recent studies, attribute both race and a whole range of traits to others whom they hear, on the basis of what they hear (Abrahams, 1972). These clusters of traits are assigned as units, i.e., once a racial stereotype is elicited in adults, the person is tagged with the whole cluster of attributes associated with the stereotype. As DeCamp and Baird note:

> "Although non-standard features included in...speech samples were gradually increased, a minimum amount of non-standardness was sufficient to elicit a complete stereotype of a Black. It appears that language merely served to identify the speaker's group membership." (1973:68)

And Williams (1973:126) notes:

> "Persons tend to employ stereotyped sets of attitudes as anchor points for their evaluation of whatever is presented to them as a sample of a person's speech...persons have stereotyped sets of attitudes about dialects of speakers and these attitudes play a role in how a person perceives another person's speech characteristics."

[Insert Chart 6 about here]

These observations did not hold true for the children in our study. They seemed more open-minded than adults. When we correlated choice of race with other variables (Table II) we found that our childrens' perceptions of Voice I as Black did not significantly correlate with choice of the negative traits in society's stereotype. Thus for the children in our study, the speech samples elicited judgments which did not correlate significantly with choice of race. In other words, the speech itself, and not the perceived race of the speaker, was the basis of their positive and negative judgments in terms of the four categories on the semantic differential scale.

[Insert Table II about here]

For example, of 34 children who identified Voice I (standard) as Black, 31 judged the speaker to be "smart". Further, of the 10 Black lower working class children sampled, 4 said Voice II (non-standard) was White and dumb, and 3 said she was Black and smart. This tendency in the present research supports the finding of Shuy and Williams, who noted such a trend for Black adults: "Blacks generally evaluate Negro speech in a more positive manner than do white respondents." (1973:90). This tendency for the Black children to evaluate Black non-standard speech more positively than (what was perceived as) white non-standard speech should be investigated further, and include a larger sample of 8 and 9 year-old subjects.

We thus found no significant correlations between judgments about race and the other categories on the scale. Because of the small numbers in this aspect of the study, idiosyncratic responses are prominent. For example, some children made decisions about a speaker's race and intelligence but not her economic status or appearance, while others marked the middle line (I don't know) for race and intelligence, while making a decision about her economic status and appearance. In addition, individual responses showed different decision-making strategies. As we discovered in our discussion with him, one boy interpreted Voice II's "then I wash the suppa dishes" as silver dishes. Thus, based on what he believed he heard in the content of Voice II's speech he decided she was rich since she was washing "silver dishes." This raises an interesting point. Agheyisi and Fishman (1970) have proposed that adult

judges in their experiment were reacting to the congruity or lack of it between topic, speaker, and the particular language variety. Thus although adults can perceive "incongruities" in speech samples, the same does not appear to be true for at least some of our children. This child evidently attached greater significance in making a judgment about Voice II's economic background to what he thought was the content of her speech and not to any other variable, such as the language variety to which he was listening.

Our study demonstrated no significant difference in the responses of the children dependent upon their different socioeconomic backgrounds. All children seemed to be responding according to the values placed by society on "standard" and "nonstandard" speech. Chi-square analyses failed to detect any significant correlations between the socioeconomic background of the subjects and any of the response categories, or between choice of race and any of the response categories.

There was also no significant correlation between sex of the subject and the pattern of responses found in our study. However, it will be necessary to study a larger sample to make certain there are no significant correlations between sex and race of the subjects and their response patterns.

Our discussions with the children afterwards seemed to support the findings on the differential scale. The discussions showed that the children possessed and could conceptualize an awareness of speech differences. In response to queries about the difference between the voices some typical comments were: "The second one spoke wrong";

"The first one sounded better"; and "The second one was Black." In fact their comments merely paralleled their responses on the differential scale.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study demonstrated that 8 and 9 year-old children are sensitive to speech differences and moreover have absorbed many of the attitudes of society toward standard and non-standard speech. They recognize that non-standard English is stigmatized; they in turn stigmatize others on the basis of non-standard speech. They are also able to verbally conceptualize their attitudes toward speech differences. However, our study indicates that they have not yet formulated a complete racial stereotype matching the adult model, since the variables we considered functioned independently of perceived race to a degree not previously suspected.

TABLE I

SUMMARY OF CHILDRENS' JUDGEMENTS ABOUT SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF STANDARD (VOICE I) AND NONSTANDARD (VOICE II) ENGLISH SPEAKERS

VOICES	SCALE CATEGORY	RESPONSE CATEGORIES	CHILDREN							
			UPPER MIDDLE CLASS		MIDDLE CLASS		LOWER & WORKING CLASS		OVERALL AVERAGE	
			%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
VOICE I	INTELLIGENCE	SMART	93	28	97	29	81	26	90	83
		DUMB	0	0	3	1	6	2	3	3
		DON'T KNOW	7	2	0	0	13	4	7	6
VOICE II		SMART	57	17	57	17	41	13	51	47
		DUMB	30	9	43	13	47	15	40	37
		DON'T KNOW	13	4	0	0	12	4	9	8
VOICE I	APPEARANCE	PRETTY	53	16	70	21	72	23	65	60
		UGLY	20	6	17	5	7	2	15	13
		DON'T KNOW	26	8	13	4	21	7	20	19
VOICE II		PRETTY	23	7	37	11	31	10	30	28
		UGLY	50	15	53	16	48	15	50	46
		DON'T KNOW	27	8	10	3	21	7	20	18
VOICE I	PERSONALITY	NICE	93	28	93	28	94	30	93	86
		MEAN	3.5	1	7	2	6	2	5	5
		DON'T KNOW	3.5	1	0	0	0	0	2	1
VOICE II		NICE	87	26	77	23	83	27	82	76
		MEAN	6.5	2	17	5	17	5	13	12
		DON'T KNOW	6.5	2	6	2	0	0	5	4
VOICE I	ECON. B'KGRND	RICH	53	16	57	17	44	14	51	47
		POOR	27	8	20	6	25	8	24	22
		DON'T KNOW	20	6	23	7	31	10	25	23
VOICE II		RICH	27	8	30	9	25	8	27	25
		POOR	43	13	57	17	47	15	49	45
		DON'T KNOW	30	9	13	4	28	9	24	22
VOICE I	RACE	WHITE	63	19	43	13	53	17	53	49
		BLACK	30	9	47	14	34	11	37	34
		DON'T KNOW	7	2	10	3	13	4	20	9
VOICE II		WHITE	0	0	0	0	19	6	6	6
		BLACK	100	30	97	29	81	26	93	85
		DON'T KNOW	0	0	3	1	0	0	1	1

CHART 1

CHILDREN'S JUDGEMENTS ABOUT INTELLIGENCE
OF STANDARD (VOICE I) AND NONSTANDARD (VOICE II)
ENGLISH SPEAKERS

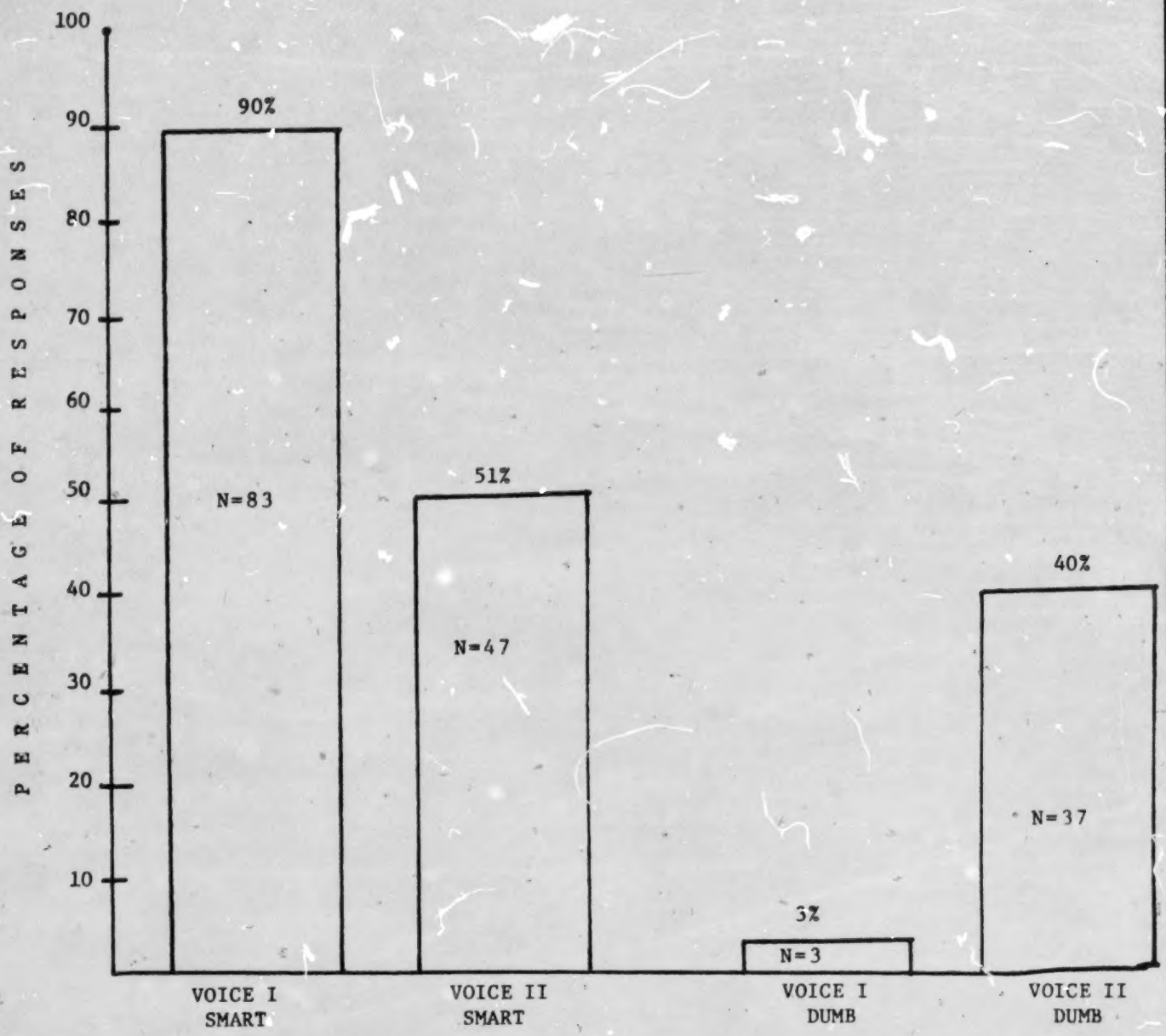

CHART 2

CHILDREN'S JUDGEMENTS ABOUT APPEARANCE
OF STANDARD (VOICE I) AND NONSTANDARD (VOICE II)
ENGLISH SPEAKERS

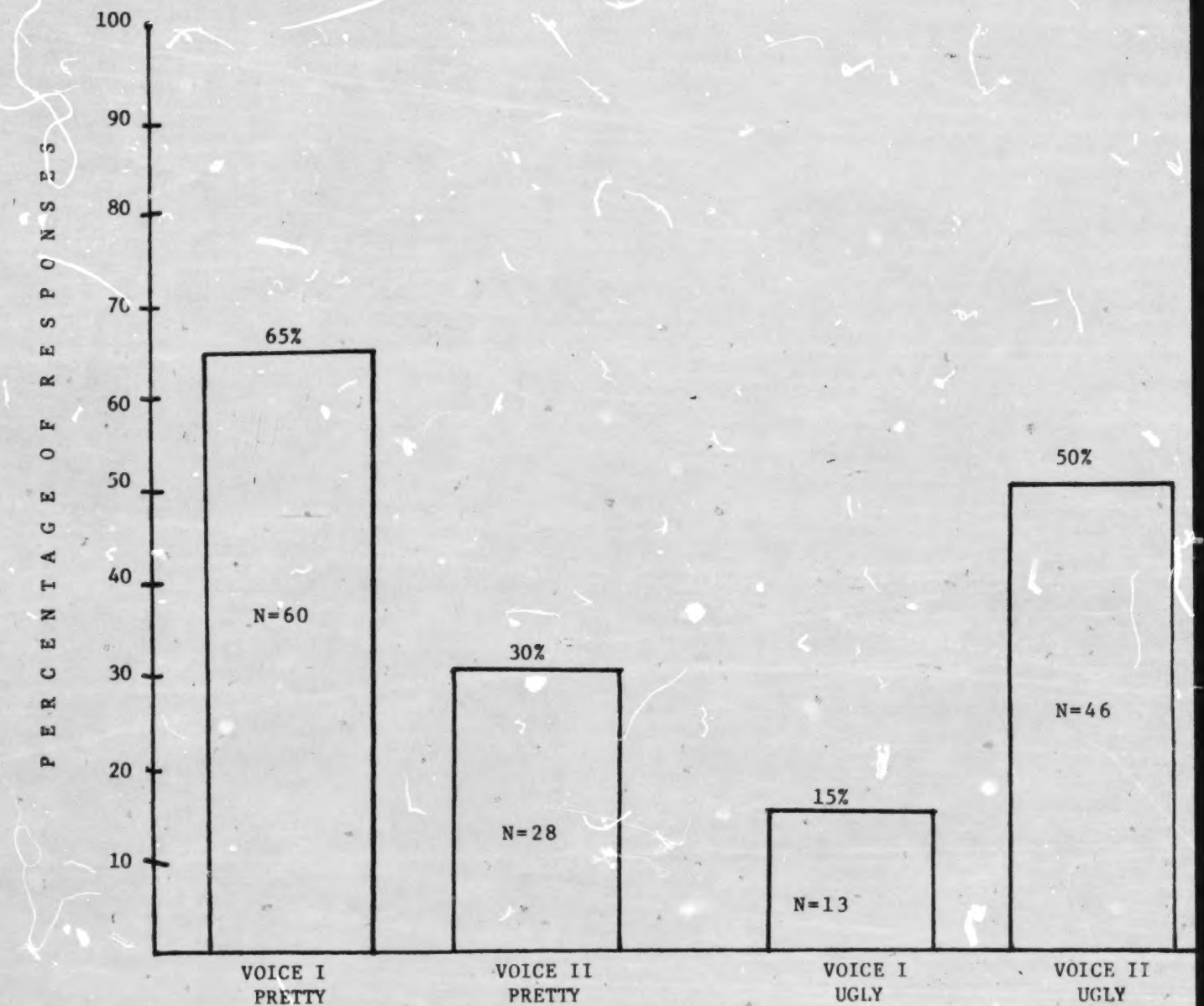

CHART 3

CHILDREN'S JUDGEMENTS ABOUT ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF STANDARD (VOICE I) AND NONSTANDARD (VOICE II) ENGLISH SPEAKERS

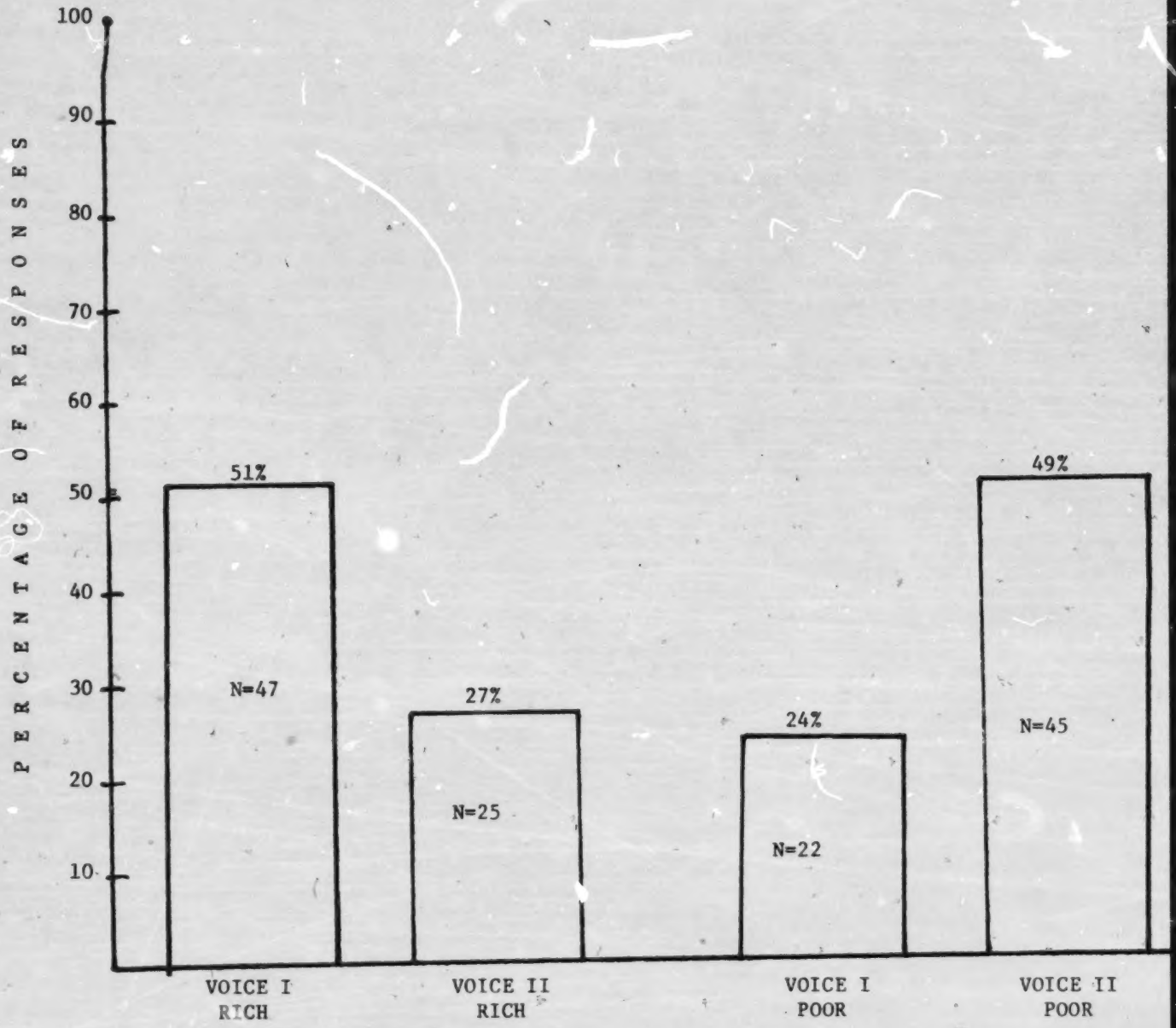

CHART 4

CHILDREN'S JUDGEMENTS ABOUT PERSONALITY
OF STANDARD (VOICE I) AND NONSTANDARD (VOICE II)
ENGLISH SPEAKERS

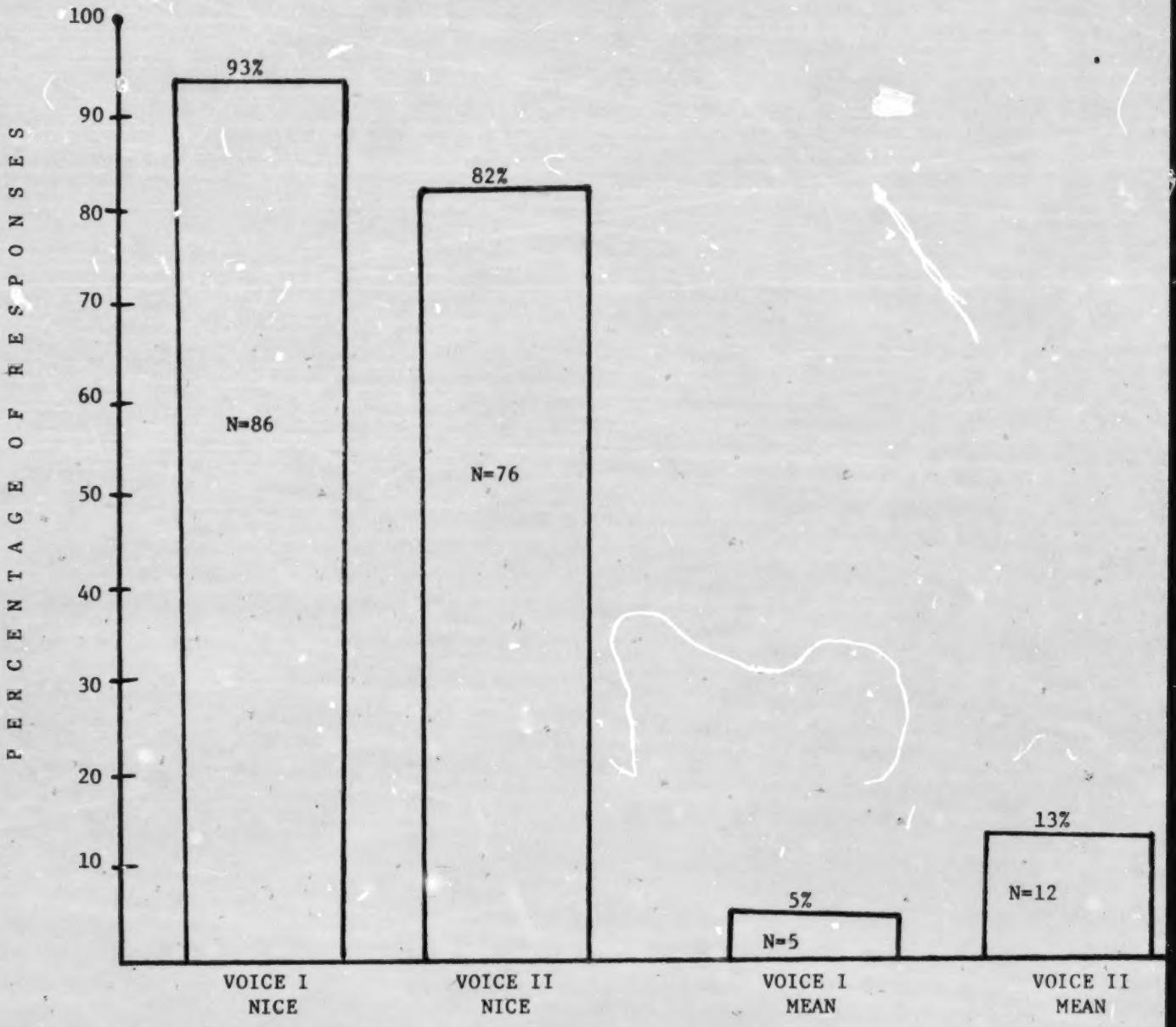

CHART 5

CHILDREN'S JUDGEMENTS ABOUT RACE
OF STANDARD (VOICE I) AND NONSTANDARD (VOICE II)
ENGLISH SPEAKERS

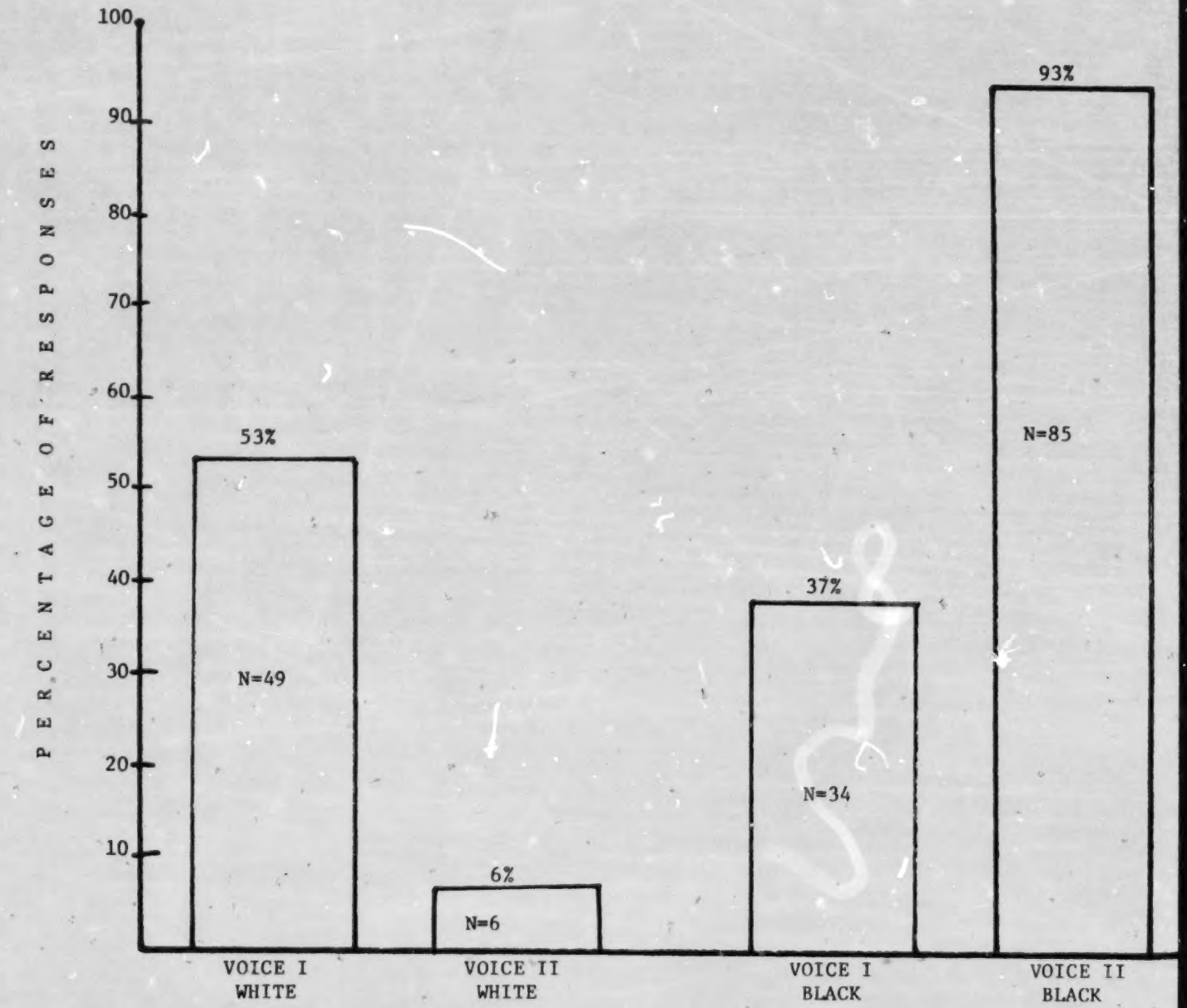

CHART 6

CHILDRENS' JUDGEMENTS ABOUT STANDARD (VOICE I)
AND NON-STANDARD (VOICE II) ENGLISH SPEAKERS

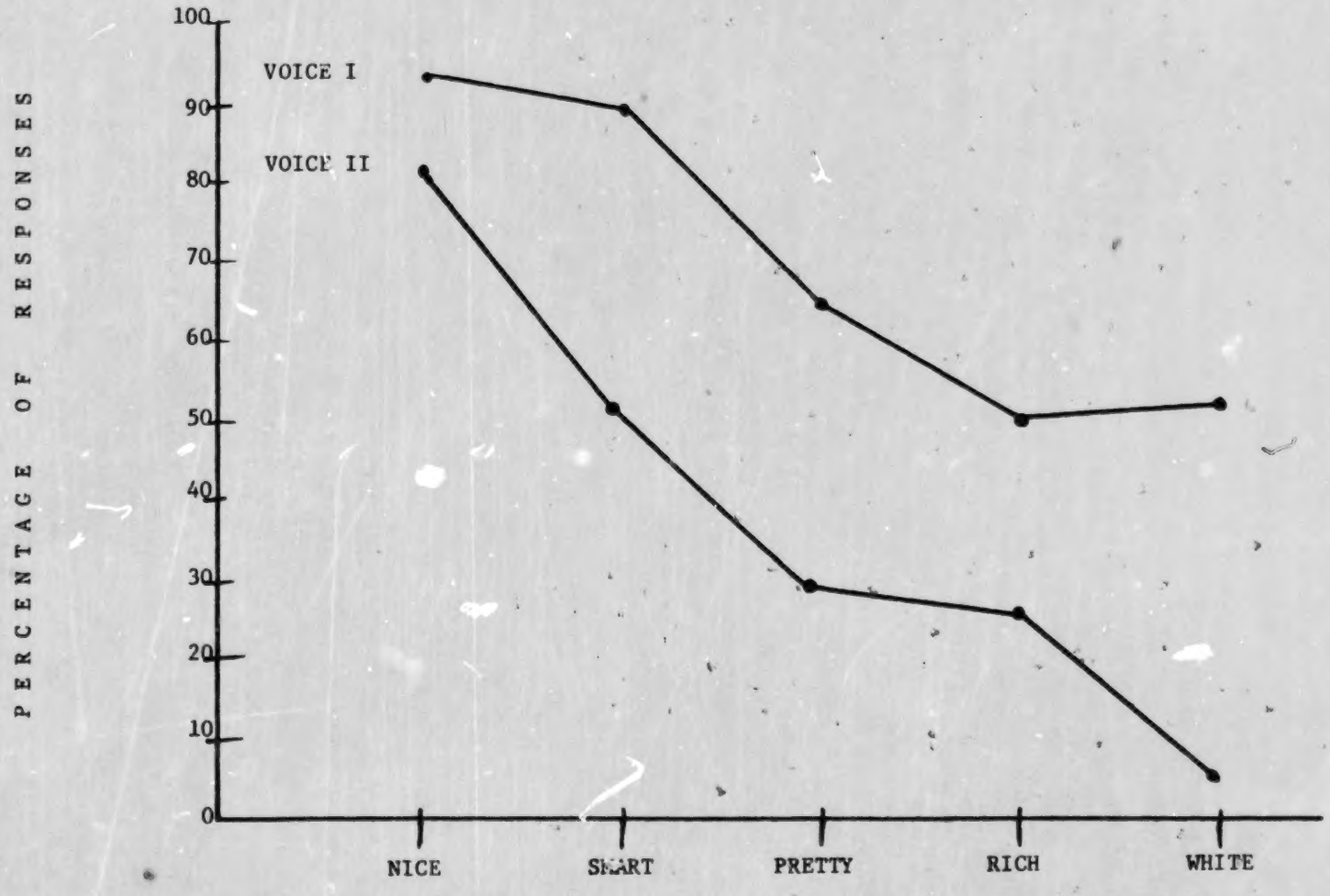

TABLE II

JUDGEMENTS ABOUT RACE AND OTHER VARIABLES

CHILDREN WHO SAID VOICE I (STANDARD ENGLISH) WAS WHITE

CHILDREN'S BACKGROUND	N*	SMART	DUMB	RICH	POOR	NICE	MEAN	PRETTY	UGLY
UPPER MIDDLE CLASS	19	16	0	11	4	18	0	10	4
MIDDLE CLASS	13	13	0	7	1	13	0	8	3
LOWER WORKING CLASS	17	14	0	8	4	16	1	16	1
TOTALS	49	43	0	26	9	47	1	34	8

CHILDREN WHO SAID VOICE I (STANDARD ENGLISH) WAS BLACK

CHILDREN'S BACKGROUND	N*	SMART	DUMB	RICH	POOR	NICE	MEAN	PRETTY	UGLY
UPPER MIDDLE CLASS	9	9	0	4	3	8	1	5	2
MIDDLE CLASS	14	13	1	8	4	12	2	6	5
LOWER WORKING CLASS	11	9	2	3	4	11	0	5	1
TOTALS	34	31	3	15	11	31	3	16	8

* Total N for this Table is 83. Nine children indicated "don't know" for race of Voice I.

APPENDIX

NAME_____

AGE____ BOY GIRL

VOICE 1

		very	kind of	don't know	kind of	very	
1.	SMART	__	__	__	__	__	DUMB
2.	UGLY	" __	" __	" __	" __	" __	PRETTY
3.	NICE	" __	" __	" __	" __	" __	MEAN
4.	POOR	" __	" __	" __	" __	" __	RICH
5.	WHITE	" __	" __	" __	" __	" __	BLACK

* * * * * * VOICE 2 * * * * * *

1.	SMART	__	__	__	__	__	DUMB
2.	UGLY	__	__	__	__	__	PRETTY
3.	NICE	__	__	__	__	__	MEAN
4.	POOR	__	__	__	__	__	RICH
5.	WHITE	__	__	__	__	__	BLACK

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